The Realities of Urban School Reform 1

D IANA LAM arrived in San Antonio in 1994 with a national reputation as a rising star in the school administration firmament. It was a reputation launched at the Harvard Graduate School of Education where she completed her training, followed by leadership posts in Massachusetts's Chelsea District and Dubuque, Iowa, and rounded out with involvement with a variety of well-regarded reform organizations such as the New American Schools Development Corporation. An immigrant of Peruvian background, Lam appeared to be the perfect candidate to head up the troubled San Antonio district, with its 60,700 students and a twenty-year legacy of depressingly poor student-achievement results.

When she arrived, she reports, she found forty-five out of the ninety-five schools in her district to be on the state's "watch list," so seriously behind in student-achievement results that the state was considering moving in to take them over. By 1998, following implementation of an impressive standards-based effort conceived and led by Lam to raise student performance, only three of the schools were still under the state's watchful eye. Despite this progress, just twelve months later, Lam's contract was bought out by a school board unaccountably dissatisfied with her performance.

In New York City a similar scenario played itself out in the 1990s around school chancellor Ramon Cortines.[1] Like Lam, Cortines was nationally respected from his years in school leadership, in his case in San Francisco, where he rose through the system to become school superintendent. A member of the educational advisory board of New American Schools, Cortines was recruited to New York City by Mayor David Dinkins, and his contract continued when federal district attorney Rudolph Giuliani succeeded Dinkins. But following months of increasingly public wrangles between the chancellor and Giuliani about who was in charge of policy directions for New York's schools (and how much money should be spent on them), the mayor forced Cortines from his position.

Meanwhile, in New York City's District 2, a variation on the theme of leadership turnover was occurring. Anthony Alvarado, the highly successful superintendent of the district, moved on his own volition to San Diego to assume the newly created position of chancellor of instruction. He left behind some noteworthy successes in District 2, a small elementary and middle school district that he had turned around. The district's schools boasted the second-highest mathematics and reading scores in the city when Alvarado left. But questions remain about whether his reforms can survive the leadership transition. And can the achievement improvements he coaxed out of the system at the elementary and middle school levels be extended to high schools? American secondary schools in general—urban, suburban, and rural—are virtually uncharted reform territory, a great Dismal Swamp into which many a brave elementary and middle school reformer has ventured never to be seen or heard from again.

Years earlier, John Murphy had been recruited by a board of community and business leaders to lead a new reform initiative in Charlotte, North Carolina. He convened an advisory panel of national experts and at their advice created an ambitious new performance-based management system for the district. Under the plan, using combinations of public funds and private contributions, he brought new ideas, methods, and people to Charlotte. However, Murphy's abrasive personal style generated conflict within the school system, and groups of school employees led an effort to defeat pro-Murphy school board members. Murphy resigned, and though Charlotte community leaders remain determined to improve the schools, much of what they started had to be abandoned.

Leadership turnover and abandonment of reform initiatives are endemic in urban school systems. The average tenure of an urban superintendent is under five years. The stories of San Antonio, New York City, and Charlotte are not at all unusual. Few bold reform initiatives can survive the fire they ignite in the schools and the community. Only the reasons for the turbulence and abandonment change.

Milwaukee's former superintendent Howard Fuller was pushed out by teacher opposition to his reforms. He is convinced the teachers' union ran board candidates against him simply because of his insistence that the schools and professional educators were responsible for the poor performance of African-American children in their classes. "They take credit for the successes; they just can't turn their backs on the failures," said Fuller, a social worker who had never worked in a school system until he was tapped for the top school job in Milwaukee.

In 1996 a congressionally mandated reform board in the District of Columbia agreed on the need for strong leadership and recruited retired army general Julius Becton to straighten out the school system's Byzantine finances, teacher recruitment, and expenditure controls. However, Becton walked away from the school system in anger in 1998, fed up with the realities of administering public schools in the nation's capital. Bureaucratic incompetence within the school system (or hostility to his reform agenda) delayed the opening of schools three weeks at the beginning of Becton's second school year (the third time in five years the schools had not opened on time under Becton and his predecessor Franklin Smith). And Becton refused to accept what he considered to be attacks on his integrity in a city so poorly administered that its schools and the city itself had wound up, at the insistence of Congress, just short of supervision by bankruptcy judges.

No one can be certain whether the initiatives we have sketched would have dramatically improved school performance or whether the leaders associated with them would have remained effective. But one can be fairly certain that an institution or community that engages in serial abandonment of initiatives and regular rejection of leaders will not progress far.

Like a misconceived version of *High Noon*, the script and story lines rarely vary. The town is under siege. City leaders search for an idea or a person to turn the situation around. Enter Marshal Gary Cooper to the relief of the townspeople. But when Cooper needs their help, they turn

their backs, go home, and close the doors, leaving him alone to face the bad guys arriving on the noon train. "Surely you'll help me," comments Cooper, ever a believer in the perfectibility of human nature, to the city fathers. "That's why we hired you," is the response. Tension in the town is nearly unbearable as the train arrives. But to the relief of everyone, Cooper carries the day. The surprise ending in the misdirected educational parallel of *High Noon* is that, despite success, the sheriff is forced to leave town because the people do not care for all that noise.

Why Public Schools Matter

The facts are overwhelming and hard to ignore. Low-income African-American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic immigrant children make up the overwhelming majority of students in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Houston, Dallas, New Orleans, Miami, Denver, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. These students are half as likely as upper-income students to score at the basic skill level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. After grade three, urban minority children are only slightly behind national averages, but they fall farther behind the longer they remain in school.[2]

—By age 17 the average test scores for minority students are no higher than average scores for white 13-year-olds.

—Only half the children who enter big-city high schools stay through graduation four years later.

—Minority students educated in city public schools are less than half as likely as other children from low-income groups to enter four-year colleges.[3]

Although some individual schools and neighborhoods have fought successfully against these trends, we are unable to identify any city that has made significant, sustained progress citywide.

The circumstances of public education in big cities are extremely challenging. In the largest cities over 30 percent of all children live in poverty, compared to less than 20 percent elsewhere.[4] Teacher salaries are seldom as high as in wealthier suburbs, so city schools often lose their best teachers. As a result, schools in the lowest-income neighborhoods are often staffed by shifting casts of new and provisionally certified teach-

ers. City children are more likely than children elsewhere to have teachers who lack field-specific training, and the discrepancies are greatest in the most challenging fields, mathematics and science.[5]

The difficult circumstances of urban public education might provide a statistical "explanation" because poverty and minority status are correlated with poor performance. But correlation need not be causation: some minority and poor students succeed, and some schools succeed nearly as well with disadvantaged students as they do with richer, majority students. Further, this statistical explanation is not a justification for poor performance. Mothers and fathers are correct to worry about schools that do not teach their children. They have every right to be angry. Business and community leaders are also right to worry and be angry about a public education system that does not prepare children to become full participants in the social, economic, and political lives of their cities.

Although it is tempting to try to fix blame for this situation, the temptation needs to be rejected. Fixing blame does no good. Teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members are operating within the inherited constraints of the system in which they have to work. Moreover, although it is easy for community critics to convince themselves that bad faith on the part of the educational establishment explains all of the schools' ills, a moment's reflection dispels that illusion. Who is more likely to have the greater commitment to children and learning: people who chose to enter teaching, or those who decided to make their mark in business, politics, government, or the armed services? The question answers itself.

The Many Approaches to Managing School Improvement

Hoping big-city public education systems will fix themselves is also an illusion. In fact, they might be constitutionally and politically incapable of doing so. It is clear that their problems cannot be expected to go away any time soon.

Some communities, such as Washington, D.C., and Seattle, have hired former military leaders to act as superintendents. Others, including Minneapolis and Hartford, Connecticut, have hired private firms to act in their place. Still others, with Chicago and Cleveland among the most notable, have eliminated elected school boards in favor of appointed boards.

There are many ways to try to manage the pain of promoting school reform, and local leaders have often rearranged leadership positions and shuffled staff—convinced, apparently, that the fundamental problem is leadership, not the very structure of the education system itself. If the problem lies with who is in charge, changing the leadership offers promise of improvement; but if the problem lies elsewhere, replacing superintendents, creating school-site councils, and pretending that generals, private firms, and appointed boards will do what educators, the public sector, and elected boards could not is simply an exercise in postponing the inevitable reckoning.

Apparently taking account of this, some reforms look more closely at the system. Communities have experimented with changing the relationship between individual schools and the school district's central administrative office. In an effort to wring more improvement out of schools, in the early 1990s Chicago created elected school-site councils and gave them control over significant amounts of money. Disappointed with the results, Mayor Richard M. Daley Jr. next replaced the elected board with an appointed board and put a chief executive officer in charge of advancing reform. Seattle is the most prominent of several districts that have arranged for money to follow students to the schools they attend.

Communities have also tried intervening directly in the processes of teaching and learning. Columbus, Ohio, and Miami, for example, have adopted the principles of "effective schools" research, which helps school staffs clarify goals and focus on instruction.[6] The Philadelphia schools and those in Edmonds, Washington, went through exhaustive communitywide processes to create new standards for student learning. Teaching has received a lot of attention. Los Angeles and Miami created financial incentives to attract teachers with specific skills. Not to be outdone, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Houston used parts of a $500 million Annenberg Challenge grant to create new opportunities for teacher learning.

All of these strategies have stimulated a great deal of activity, and some might ultimately lead to improved schools. But none seems remotely likely to lead to major across-the-board improvements in student performance because each leaves intact the fundamental assumption at the

base of public education in the United States: "What we have in our public school system is pretty good. As reformers, our task is to improve on it a little here, tweak it a little there, and cajole a few small changes from the system somewhere else—and everything will be just fine."

In fact, it is this assumption that accounts for the disappointing results of two decades of efforts to improve American schools. The institutional reality is that within the system—and often outside it too, for those leaders coopted by the internal frame of reference—very few stakeholders are convinced of the need for profound alterations in the way the business of education is conducted. They speak of the need for change, but it is in the hope that someone else will change. They speak of "aligning" the system, but the system is not a mechanism of some kind that needs only effective tuning to perform more efficiently. It is made up of millions of students, teachers, and administrators, with all of their strengths and weaknesses. And the stakeholders speak of greater uniformity and standardization of policy and practice, all the while ignoring new developments in organizational theory. Standardization and organizational Taylorism have given way to concepts of organizational complexity and the need to accommodate it. In this environment the reforms that are possible are modest and incremental, modifications at the margin offering little promise of substantial improvement.

How else is one to explain the catastrophic performance of the schools in the nation's biggest cities? Year after year, dropout rates are high, facilities are often dangerous and almost always unpleasant, and student achievement is weak. In the face of these educational illnesses, which are life-threatening for some students immediately and in the long term stunting life's possibilities for most, the reforms bruited about at press conferences and policy enclaves amount to little more than palliatives.

In a comparable emergency involving, for instance, public health the reaction would be immeasurably more dramatic. Public leaders would insist that the medical community mobilize armies of surgeons, cardiologists, specialists in infectious disease, internists, and volunteers of all kinds. The fact that leaders outside the health community seized the initiative would be applauded. Nobody would think twice about the cost involved in this mobilization of resources. The insistence on specialists and the involvement of community volunteers would be taken for

granted. Everyone would understand that extreme responses are required in the face of threats to the community's health and well-being.

But in the face of the disaster facing public urban education, our society acts as though a modified version of business as usual will be sufficient. Although an entire generation of students has started school and left since *A Nation at Risk* first raised the alarm, the educational community and the rest of society have satisfied themselves with tinkering at the margins. Discussion of reform is dominated by educational insiders. Costs have increased, but new funds have been funneled into familiar channels. We act as though a cure for our educational malaise can be found with a warm bath—with a promise to revisit the situation tomorrow if today's placebo does not do the trick.

Spinning Wheels, Churning Policy, and Relentless Circularity

None of these efforts has perceptibly narrowed the performance gap between inner-city public school students and other American children, or is likely to do so. In part this is because, as Frederick Hess has shown, city public education systems are caught in "policy churn":

> District policymakers constantly embrace politically attractive changes, producing prodigious amounts of reform at a pace inimical to effective implementation. . . .
>
> [Districts] recycle initiatives, constantly modify previous initiatives, and adopt innovative reform A to replace practice B even as another district is adopting B as an innovative reform to replace practice A. . . .
>
> Urban districts appear to do a number of things in a stop-and-start, chaotic fashion that is not part of any clear strategy to improve specific elements of school performance.[7]

Hess paints a disturbing picture of city superintendents and other education leaders working frantically to improve schooling but not achieving any leverage on the problem. Incapable of finding a purchase, they are caught, he concludes, in a "pattern of symbolic activity."

> Reform efforts are not the solutions to problems in urban schooling and are only incidentally about improving education at all. . . . The frenetic

embrace of new approaches is not productive, largely because the very institutional incentives that drive reform activity also make likely the failure of individual reforms. Policymakers are driven by professional and community pressures to initiate a great deal of activity, because it demonstrates leadership and steers the local education agenda onto professionally and politically comfortable ground.[8]

Many political and business leaders, both in urban areas and state capitals, have come to agree. As a result, actions by state legislatures and courts and by mayors' summits have led city governments to disband and take over school systems in Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Hartford, and other cities. Congress ordered a takeover of the District of Columbia public schools. "Academic bankruptcy" legislation recently enacted in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland—and pending elsewhere—opens up the possibility of future takeovers.

Takeovers and the creation of new governing structures for public education are responses to policy churn, but they are no guarantee that it will end. New people will not necessarily have better ideas or be able to pursue bolder or more consistent strategies. The failures of takeover efforts in the District of Columbia, and the fact that the state of Ohio had to take over the Cleveland schools twice before it could find stable leadership, demonstrate the point.

New Possibilities

Still, empowering mayors and others whose worlds are wider than public education can open up new possibilities. They can introduce ideas from fields unfamiliar to public education professionals. They can also change the political calculus surrounding schools so that proposals once ruled out of the question can be entertained. New participants and even the trauma of takeovers breathe new life into the possibility of education reforms that include deregulation, weakening of union monopolies, competition among schools, and family choice.

There are other reasons to believe that changes previously thought impossible may now be feasible. Because most big city school districts

have aging teaching forces, many will lose more than half their teachers to retirement in the next five years. At the same time, districts already replace or reassign one-third of their principals annually. Rapid staff turnover creates stresses, but it also opens up the possibility of recruiting potential teachers from different sources, hiring them under different conditions, building different work environments, and backing up redefined jobs with new forms of on-the-job training.

Equally important, major changes are afoot outside the schools. New coalitions of African-American ministers and grassroots leaders are demanding educational reform in many cities. The Supreme Court's failure to overturn Milwaukee's voucher plan when offered the possibility also opens up the chance that public education in cities can be provided by nonprofit groups. Charter schools are increasingly seen in Chicago, Rochester, New York, and elsewhere as ways cities can provide choices for needy students.

Whether these opportunities for change lead to anything different— and whether changes adopted lead to improvements in urban public education—depends on the new parties' ability to design, execute, and stick with powerful reform strategies. If mayors and others who assume responsibility for city school reform continue cycling through a series of poorly implemented reforms, or try to please all the educational interest groups by doing a little of one thing here and a little of something else there, the policy churn will continue.

Today's mayors, civic and foundation leaders, and school boards must construct strategies that are more powerful, more coherent, longer lasting, and more completely carried through than past efforts. However, they cannot be made out of whole cloth or constructed in ignorance of the problems of schools. Like new management teams taking over troubled businesses, mayors and others need to learn about school reform issues without letting themselves be drawn into internecine struggles within the education establishment.

Main Competing Proposals

The urban reform struggles revolve around seven competing policy approaches identified and analyzed in *Fixing Urban Schools.*[9] The first

four describe reform as prescribed and led from the inside. The last three provide a vision of reform conceived and perhaps imposed from without.

Standards

Standards proponents urge state and local leaders to establish clear and ambitious expectations about what students should know and be able to do. They also urge states to build a system of tests, curricula, teacher training, and teaching materials, all carefully aligned with the standards, and attach real consequences to test results for schools, students, and individual teachers. (For example, failing schools might be subject to state takeover, students might be retained in grade, and teachers' salaries might be tied to student performance.)

Standards-based reform assumes that clarity about what must be taught and learned will create demand for improvements in educational methods, focus teachers' efforts on instruction, and motivate parents and students to strive for better performance. Students will learn because their goals will be clear. The standards-based system is espoused by leaders such as Marc Tucker of the National Center on Education and the Economy and Marshall Smith, formerly at Stanford University and the University of Wisconsin, who served through 1999 as acting deputy secretary in the U.S. Department of Education.

Teacher Development

The teacher development strategy encourages policymakers to invest in teacher-controlled efforts to master subject matter and devise new methods of instruction. Reform based on teachers' professional development assumes that those who take responsibility for their own learning and practice will become more effective in the classroom, the spirit of innovation will engage those whose practice is now stagnant, teacher-developed methods will be of higher quality than those created by nonteacher developers, and teacher excitement about improved practice will drive reform of public school systems. Students will learn because their teachers will be energetic, well prepared, and engaging. Prominent advocates of this approach include Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford

University, Governor James Hunt of North Carolina, and the leaders of both major teacher unions.

New School Designs

The idea of new designs is appealing in its straightforwardness: help every school implement a comprehensive schoolwide design based on a particular approach to pedagogy—for example, teach via student-initiated projects or use computer-based instruction or study and discuss great books. Design-based reform assumes that schools that use a defined and consistent approach to instruction will be more focused and consistent, teachers will work together more productively, and parents and students will fully understand what the school promises and what is required of them. It also assumes that effective designs for integrating whole schools around an instructional strategy will be picked up and used by schools and districts. Students will learn because their schools are organized to provide consistent high-quality instruction and to remedy teaching and learning failures as they occur. School designs have been championed by the business community through the New American Schools Development Corporation and by the former deputy secretary of education and chairman of the Xerox Corporation, David T. Kearns.

Decentralization and Site-Based Management

The animating idea of decentralization is the conviction that schools are overregulated by bloated district staffs. Advocates argue for providing new decisionmaking responsibilities for teachers and parents, often in conjunction with reducing the size and powers of the central office. Decentralization-based reform assumes that greater school engagement in decisionmaking will encourage teachers and principals to take the initiative in rethinking both their instructional methods and their relationships to families and neighborhoods. It also assumes that parents will become more engaged in their children's schooling, teachers and parents will work together to overcome home and neighborhood factors interfering with teaching and learning, and students will learn because parents and neighbors, who understand and support the schools' efforts, will not tolerate lax performance by students or teachers. The most promi-

nent experiment in decentralization in the United States in recent years was the 1989 reform developed in Chicago.

Insiders' Baseball

Each of the four strategies we have described—standards, professional development, school designs, and decentralization—enjoys the support of powerful political constituencies in the education community. An emphasis on standards, embraced by state agencies, corporate spokesmen, and political leaders interested in education, enjoys the wary support of teachers and local administrators. (Who, after all, can be seriously opposed to standards?) Teacher development, the brainchild of schools of education and teachers' union officials, is acknowledged to be a significant educational need by business and policy leaders. The new school designs, developed out of corporate America's experience in redesigning itself to meet foreign competition, enjoy the support of educational visionaries of all persuasions, who are convinced that, at long last, their theories for school improvement have found a congenial home. And while decentralization and site-based decisionmaking might be the bane of a school administrator's existence, the approach has been enthusiastically hailed by teachers' unions as a means of ridding the classroom of the meddling of officious central offices. In short, there is someone, somewhere in the interest groups surrounding education, in favor of each of these approaches—and often several someones.

But although each of the four proposals is modestly different from the others, the differences are more apparent than real. The standards-based approach (accompanied by its emphasis on alignment of tests, curriculum, teacher training, and curriculum materials to the standards) appears to be the most comprehensive, but the other three also require all-encompassing reform.

Teachers, after all, require development around something—standards, assessments, curricular competence, and the like, in fact around all of the things involved in standards-based reform. A serious effort at implementing new school designs or site-based management likewise requires rethinking everything about the school, root and branch. It is clear from the experience of school districts across the country that are carrying out the whole-school designs developed by the New American Schools

Development Corporation that even with a fully conceived design in hand, school districts and schools have been paralyzed by the scope of the educational decisions they needed to make. They still require an enormous amount of hand-holding and guidance from the experts who had developed the designs.[10] Turning to whole-school designs, teacher development, or site-based management has proven no panacea to avoid the complexity of the standards-based reform movement.

Because of these similarities, most of the proponents of the four strategies have little difficulty making common cause with each other. Indeed, in any educational conclave a sort of endless circularity is in evidence. Like the cook who wishes he had some eggs (because he could then make ham and eggs, if only he had some ham), educational theory seems forever trapped in a perpetual loop of needing something else. It wishes it had assessments, because then it could assess educational standards, if only it had standards, which should be tied to the curriculum, yet to be developed, which teachers then need to be trained to teach.

The perpetual circularity of this discussion, the philosophical predicate of policy churn, explains why educators can move from one policy discussion to another barely missing a beat, or even much modifying what they had intended to say. Because each of the major topics—standards, assessment, teaching, curriculum, school designs, and administrative structures—is enduring and significant, it is safe to enter the conversation at any point and, in effect, change the subject. The conversation is so circular that nobody notices. And the phenomenon is so familiar that nobody objects.

But the same cannot be said of the three remaining strategies described in *Fixing Urban Schools*: charter schools, contracting, and vouchers. For here, the frame of reference for the reform discussion is so radically new that everyone in the education community notices.

Charter Schools

Charter advocates promote authorizing schools to operate independently as long as they get good results for students, abide by public rules about equity of student admission and financial accounting, and allow parents to choose among schools. For the most part, charter supporters

have called for a limited number of such schools in a district or a state, although the total number is increasing fairly rapidly. Thirty-six states (plus the District of Columbia) have now authorized over 1,000 schools nationwide. Charter schooling assumes that the opportunity to innovate will unite parents and teachers, that schools of choice will become strong communities, and that rivalry between charter schools and regular public schools will lead to demand for more widespread innovation and school freedom. Students will learn because schools will be specialized to meet particular needs and will strive to be considered highly effective. Support for charters, originally advocated by Ted Kolderie at the University of Minnesota, was limited at one time. It is now so broad and bipartisan that President Clinton did not hesitate to support a federal program to help encourage the establishment of 3,000 charter schools in his 1997 State of the Union address.

School Contracting

School contracting would create school-specific performance agreements that give schools complete control over their funds and staffing as long as they deliver promised curriculum and instructional methods, allow families to choose the schools their children attend, and see that students meet performance goals. It is the charter concept expanded districtwide. In some ways contracting can be understood as mandatory site-based management with parental choice and performance requirements tossed in. Contracting assumes that school independence and competition for students will encourage the search for more effective methods of instruction and that family choice will strengthen schools and family-school bonds. Students will learn because competition will force every school to focus its work on an explicit theory of teaching and learning, and parents will be able to select schools that match their children's interests and learning styles. Advocates include the authors of this book, along with James Guthrie of Vanderbilt University and Lawrence Pierce, recently retired from the University of Washington. Former Department of Education Deputy Secretary David T. Kearns and his colleague James Harvey have also supported contracting tied to national standards development.

Vouchers

Advocates of vouchers would eliminate direct public funding of schools in favor of giving vouchers to parents to be redeemed for tuition at any school. Voucher proposals assume that freeing up demand will attract high-quality independent school providers and drive innovation, and that choice will allow families to select schools they trust and can support. Students will learn because competition will favor schools that are productive and responsive and eliminate schools that provide ineffective instruction. Voucher advocates envision all the benefits of the market—competition and the ability to comparison-shop for quality—with few of the drawbacks, including false advertising and consumer fraud. Vouchers have attracted an eclectic mix of proponents from conservative economist Milton Friedman in the 1960s to progressive reformers, including former Milwaukee school superintendent Howard Fuller, in the 1990s.[11]

Outsiders' Pressure

What unites these last three proposals is that each has been advanced by reformers outside the education establishment. One finds very few stalwarts from schools of education advocating charters, contracting, or vouchers. Educators have given ground grudgingly on charter schools, but even here it is clear that pressures within the system unite to reimpose on charter schools the very regulations their charters were intended to rid them of.[12] What is clear is that, disenchanted with the possibilities of genuine reform from within, people outside the education system have intensified the pressure for more radical and fundamental change.

Insiders rally to many familiar flags when under assault by proponents of charters, contracting, or vouchers. Insiders are inclined to argue that providing funds outside the system will weaken public education, as though public education is the system and not the public that supports it and whom it is supposed to serve. At the extreme, educators will argue that this is "our money." They also point to the untried nature of these proposals. Archly inquiring as to how accountability is to be ensured, they conveniently ignore the lack of accountability that character-

izes public education today. More thoughtful critics of these proposals worry about how the function of the traditional public school as social unifier will be passed on in an era of charters, contracts, or vouchers. This is a serious concern that requires a serious response from outsiders.

Efficacy of the Seven Proposals

In *Fixing Urban Schools* the authors analyzed each of the seven proposals from the point of view of their strongest supporters, asking, "if this initiative worked exactly as you expect, how would it lead to better schools and increased student achievement?" We learned that there is a plausible case for each of the proposals; each addresses a real problem and would probably cause real changes in public education if fully implemented.

But we also found that none of the proposals was sufficient because none could deliver all of the changes its proponents intended unless other changes, which the proposal itself could not deliver, occurred at the same time. For example, reforms based on teacher training do not create incentives to overcome some teachers' reluctance to put in the time and effort to improve their knowledge and skills. In a similar vein, reforms such as vouchers do not in themselves guarantee that there will be a plentiful supply of high-quality independent school providers or that enough teachers and principals qualified to run such schools exist. As *Fixing Urban Schools* concluded, every one of the major education reform proposals has a "zone of wishful thinking" in which its proponents assume but do not provide for complementary changes in individuals and society.

The earlier book also showed that the major proposals have complementary strengths and weaknesses. Proposals such as teacher training lack strong performance incentives, which vouchers and contracting provide aplenty. Marketlike proposals such as contracting lack major investments in teacher and administrator capacity, but teacher training and new school designs encourage just these features. Standards and new school designs, by contrast, provide useful information about desired practices and outcomes, but they rarely set out to create flexibility for educators in highly regulated urban schools so that the manner in which time, staff, and resources are used can be changed.

Three Essential Elements

Fixing Urban Schools concluded that none of the major proposals could by itself transform schools and student learning, but that hybrid reforms, combining the strengths of different proposals, were more promising and likely to be more powerful. It also suggested a way of thinking about how to build and assess the potential value of hybrid proposals. Every systemwide reform strategy must have three strong and interdependent elements: *incentives for school performance*, *ways of increasing school capabilities*, and *opportunities for school staff to change how they serve students*.

These elements must work together. If a strategy includes incentives, every adult's performance matters. This element encourages schools in which students learn because the people who work in them are rewarded, and children are removed from situations in which they are not learning. If a strategy includes increasing school capabilities, the school's capacity to function in its basic role is enhanced. The community invests in new ideas, new methods of instruction, teacher training, and recruitment of new teachers. Schools get help devising improvement plans and assessing their progress. And communities insist schools fill teacher vacancies with the best available people, not just those who are on the top of the civil service transfer list. If a strategy increases opportunities for school freedom, creativity is encouraged to blossom. School leaders and teachers, relieved of rules that limit instruction and make it routine, are free to use staff and money in innovative ways.

Just as all three features must work together, all three are essential. Each reinforces the others. Incentives highlight the importance of performance, investing in capacity building raises aspirations, and freedom removes the excuses for failing to strive for high standards. Policymakers who hope to reform schools by prescribing one or two of the features while neglecting the third will be entering simply another zone of wishful thinking and setting themselves up for more policy churn.

After reviewing these seven major proposals for transforming public education, *Fixing Urban Schools* concluded that there is broad agreement about how the environment for teaching and learning must change. The reform proposals all intend to make urban schools simpler, more focused places where adults share ideas about good teach-

ing and where teachers and parents share responsibility for children's learning and well-being.

Taken together, existing reform proposals might be joined together in effective strategies that combine opportunities for changes in the ways schools are staffed and run, incentives for educators to seek improvements and change their routines, and capabilities for higher performance based on proven ideas about instruction and school management.

At present, however, these initiatives are not taken together. Combined strategies that draw from the strengths of diverse reforms are prevented by rivalries and cultural gaps among reformers. Rival groups of academics and reform promoters think they own the intellectual and moral high ground and that proposals competing with their own would have disastrous consequences.

Effective big-city reform strategies are possible. But many things must change. Scholars who invent and advocate reform ideas must adopt principles of truth in advocacy. Foundations and businesses that support local reform efforts must adopt the discipline of cause and effect thinking and refuse to be captured by ideas that are too one-sided to work. Local authorities, including mayors, school boards, superintendents, and civic leaders, must resist adopting feel-good and quick-fix reforms and commit to hard-nosed evaluation and continuous strengthening of reform initiatives.

Those were difficult conclusions to reach at the time. They have not become easier to contemplate since the book was published. But our conviction that one-size-fits-all reforms cannot work and our commitment to hard-nosed evaluation and continuous strengthening of local initiatives has only increased since *Fixing Urban Schools* was published. For the lessons we have learned in six cities make it clear that unless policymakers outside the schools insist on powerful new formulations to improve school and student performance, our cities and their citizens will continue to be the victims of what amounts to policy churn and educational quackery: quick-fix reforms that accomplish little, but leave the public more cynical about its schools after the good feeling accompanying their implementation has disappeared and nothing has changed.